House of Hope
September 17, 2010
John Buchanan
Capital Campaign Kickoff

I'm delighted to be here.

Connections at House of Hope include
Linda Loving-with whom I was privileged to work at Fourth Presbyterian Church and whose ministry I have followed closely. She has become a special friend. I was privileged to speak at her installation here. And now she is back in Chicago, coming out of retirement to help us out at a critical time in the life of Fourth Presbyterian Church. Now-having completed chemotherapy, at the end of daily radiation treatments- and recovering and thinking about what's next. Linda sends her greetings and love

And, of course, David Van Dyke , one of the rising stars in the PC (USA), a wise and graceful leader. He sat in the pews of Fourth Presbyterian Church. Then was pastor at Broad Street Presbyterian Church-had a distinguished ministry. And now here.

And most recently JoAnn Lee, one of our better products, a Lilly Resident for the last two years at Fourth Church.

There are other connections: House of Hope and Fourth Presbyterian Church share the same architect, Ralph Adams Cram, one of the great figures in American architecture: House of Hope, Fourth Presbyterian Church, East Liberty in Pittsburgh, Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City.

We love our Cram building-as you do.

However, it never occurred to Cram that anyone might want to come to church – actually come into his building – and move about inside it, Cram who was anything but young, strong and of perfect health. It never occurred to him that people in wheelchairs might want to worship God in his building, on crutches, or old enough to have difficulty with steps. Nor did it occur to him that once inside, anyone would need to use a rest room. It's not a great topic for a banquet and maybe he was a little more physically humane when he designed House of Hope. But he designed Fourth Presbyterian Church with a sanctuary capacity of 1400-1500, with one toilet, in a small closet-like space-just outside of the north transept. So, God forbid, if you needed to use it and were seated in the back you had to

walk a very long way down the north aisle in full view of 1400 people, all of whom knew exactly what was going on.

And children-apparently Presbyterians- didn't have children in 1914, or if they did, they didn't bring them to church.

Enough critique of our architect. He was a great one and we are blessed by his brilliance-and we-and you-happily put our shoulders to the task of bringing these late 19th – early 20th century church buildings into the 21st century. We kick off our plan and capital campaign this Sunday.

And we share history. Both churches were completed and open for business in 1914. I have had great fun with that. I have led into a capital campaign sermon with an opening something like this . . . "May 1914, the people of the North Side of Chicago were thrilled with the magnificent new structure about to open. In the years ahead, thousands and thousands of people would enter and sit together. They would eat and drink and sing together. They would rejoice and lament. They would bring into this structure their highest hopes and their grief and despair. The structure to which I refer, of course, is Wrigley Field, home of the Chicago Cubs which first opened its gates in the same week in May as the Fourth Presbyterian Church.

Which brings me to the current unpleasantries between the Twins and the Chicago White Sox (depending on outcome!)

You treated us a little roughly, don't you think (or-we are grateful for breathing a little life into our fortunes).

It's not as if Chicago doesn't need it, what with Northsiders waiting for 102 years of mediocrity-waiting like Israel in lonely exile, in the darkness, waiting-but in hope-while upstarts like the Twins – who came to Minnesota in 1961 and heave had the audacity to win 3 American League pennants (65, 87, 91) and 2 World Series Championships (87 and 91) while we sit and wait until next year for 102 years. Talk about pathetic. And your new Cathedral-ballpark-with all that food-and all those rest rooms!

I'm delighted to be here as you launch this very important project to bring your wonderful building into the 21st century, and to fit it for ministry-for decades and generations to come.

Sue and I have fallen in love with Italy and we go every year, after Easter. We rent a little house in the hills of Umbria-off-season: we take a duffle bag full of books, 3 pounds of Starbucks coffee, move in and live in

Italy. What I do in Italy is read and look at churches, with a little pasta and vina rossa in between.

Every day or so we take a drive-to a hill town, look around, have a cappuccino and find the church in the center of the town, always open. We sit down in a pew-put a Euro in the box, light a candle and say a prayer for a son or daughter, grandchild who needs a prayer that day, or a member of the congregation who is lonely, sick, facing surgery, and I try to remember to say a prayer of gratitude for that particular church, sitting there as it has for maybe five, six centuries. Every city and small town has one at the center; large cities of a cathedral, or Duomo, the seat of the diocese. Some are stunning-Assisi-with its amazing frescoes by Giotto of the life of St. Francis: Florence with its dome by Brunelleschi, an engineering and architectural miracle. Large or small-I sit in one almost every day and think about the building and what it must have looked like 400 years ago when the walls were covered with frescoes, a few fragments of which are still visible, colorful expressions of Bible stories, saints and popes. I like to think of all the people who sat in the space over the centuries. And I like to think about how it was built. There is one thing they all have in common: it took a long time to build them, sometimes centuries. One generation began, broke ground, dug foundations deep in the earth. That was it. Another generation took up the task, finished the foundation and started on the walls, a few feet out of the ground. The next generation took over and built frames and lintels. It took centuries. Some are not complete yet- and all of them are being restored, repaired, rebuilt. And the thought always occurs to me that this task of building a church is really never completed.

But the church is the people, not the building, isn't it? Buildings are what is wrong with the church: all those lavish structures-all that money. Judas was the first person to talk like that-suggesting that the costly ointment a woman poured over Jesus' feet could have been sold and the money given to the poor-until Jesus corrected him by saying some things are precious enough to warrant our resources.

Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Sprong-when the head of the Diocese of Newark argued against critics who thought resources should not be used maintaining church buildings said it isn't money wasted at all. In addition to food and shelter poor people need a reminder that there is beauty in this world and sometimes a church is the only reminder there is.

Eugene Peterson responds to critics of institutional religion with all its paraphernalia by saying if you read the Bible you can't recruit Jesus in a campaign to bash and denigrate religious institutions. Jesus, Peterson says,

took the synagogues and temples very seriously: spent major time on them: led his disciples into their buildings.

So Jesus calls people today, I believe, into church-to begin being faithful there, in the world, as a church building is in the world: to go out from them to their work and lives and to return for comfort and encouragement. University of Chicago scholar Jean Bethke Elshtain says there is evidence that the existence of a church building, even a run down-closed building, has a measureable positive effect on the level of crime in high crime neighborhoods.

So, no, it is not entirely true that the church is the people, not the building. The truth, it seems to me, is that the church is the people and the building, however grand or modest, where we gather to pray and say "thank you" and from which we go every week into the world to live for Jesus, and to which we will return next Sunday (see Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, p. 231).

My second conclusion- after more than 40 years of this business, and after sitting in all those churches is that building a church is a task that is never completed, but handed down from one generation to the next.

The great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime: therefore we must be saved by hope."

And third, (the preacher can never get away from three points and a conclusion, even when not preaching. My youngster, now adult, still says, "Don't ask Dad a question unless you have a long time – his answers begin with the Roman Empire, work their way up through history to the present, and have three main points and a conclusion.")

Point three: your city needs a strong House of Hope- the world needs the church. I realize I'm swimming upstream on that one. The mainline church continues to decline numerically and our culture seems to becoming more secular.

Barbara Wheeler, who knows more about churches than anyone I know, says we have crossed a divide. Before, if you didn't hold traditional religious beliefs and belong to a church you felt obliged to explain yourself. Now the pressure is to explain why you do.

Wheeler says that when she travels she reads the personal ads in local newspapers and has discovered that "more and more among the

undesirable characteristics in a person being sought is organized religion. It's not as bad a smoking but in some parts of the country, it's close." (*Who Needs the Church?*)

Peter Gomes tells the wonderful story of the parents of a Harvard student who made an appointment with him to discuss a problem they were having with their daughter. "And what might the problem be?" Gomes asked. The anxious, worried parents answered somberly: "She's become a Christian and she goes to church on Sunday."

Now there is literally a multitude of people trying to figure out what happened and what to do about it. And there is no small amount of blaming. Conservative evangelical Presbyterians are convinced that liberal, progressive Presbyterians are at fault. My conclusion is that nobody's at fault. The world that we once dominated has changed. And we are called by God, I deeply believe, not to resist and resent and try to recapture an era that is over, but to prayerfully and creatively discern what God has in mind for us now.

And I am convinced that what God has in mind for you and me – is to keep these churches of ours strong and faithful and healthy – to maintain our buildings – reminders to a culture inclined to forget – of the transcendent, the beautiful, the holy. . . .

to remind a secular culture in the midst of a powerful individualism that there is health and meaning in community, in a community gathered under a common cause and common commitment to the world and its people

I'm occasionally asked to speak to seminary and divinity school students about the church, about which they are quizzical and skeptical, as they ought to be. I did it twice last week. It's always a little frustrating because while I can explain the mechanics and the techniques, I can't find the words, and they haven't been around long enough to have experienced the church when it is authentically living out in the world the saving love of God in its Lord Jesus Christ. I simply don't have words, and maybe nobody does, to tell about the church, the church at the edges and at the critical and joyful and tragic times of human life–––at births and baptisms, at weddings, and confirmations. I can never quite find words to describe what a church is when one of the community is sick and alone and care teams from the church, some of whom know the ill person and love her and some of whom do not know her but know that she is part of the community and in trouble, come into her home and do the dishes and wash bed clothes and put groceries on the shelf. I don't have words to describe how the church gathers around her family as she dies, is with them in the hospital, for the memorial service, and on into the process of grief and healing.

I don't know how to tell these students that I cannot imagine my life without what happens in church at Christmas and on Easter morning, and

Ash Wednesday and All Saints Day and Thanksgiving, and how much poorer I would be without once a week standing with the beloved community to sing “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow.”

Anne Lamott tells one of my favorite stories about a little girl who was lost and a policeman who found her and drove her around looking for her home. The little girl saw something she recognized. “There’s my church,” she said. “You can leave me out now. I can always find my way home from my church.”

And Glen Fennema, a member of my congregation who died seven or eight years ago.

Glen had AIDS. He came to church every Sunday as long as he was able. When he knew how sick he was he signed up for a trip to Italy with our Morning Choir, which is how many of us got to know him. Near the end he was in Hospice. I visited. We talked and prayed and I asked him what the most difficult part of this was for him. He said “the hardest part is at night when all the visitors are gone and they turn the lights out and its quiet and I’m alone with my thoughts and what is happening to me. I have trouble falling asleep. You know what I do? I get out my tape player; I put my earphones on, put in a tape of one of our morning worship services––I must have a hundred of them. And I listen to the entire service. Sometimes I fall asleep during your sermon . . . but I’ll bet I’m not the only one who does that,” he said. “That’s how I go to sleep every night. Here in my bed––but also in my church.”

The world needs the church. St. Paul needs the House of Hope Presbyterian Church. What a privilege to be part in your time, your lifetime – to receive this gift from those who preceded you: to make it strong and healthy and beautiful and generous and compassionate- and hand it on to those who will come after you.

God bless you-God bless this good project. It is worth your energy, your time, your money and your hope.